

Date of Hearing: July 14, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Isaac G. Bryan, Chair

SB 581 (McGuire, et al.) – As Amended April 10, 2025

SENATE VOTE: 39-0

SUBJECT: Department of Forestry and Fire Protection: employment: firefighters

SUMMARY: Establishes the Fight for Firefighters Act of 2025 to transition seasonal firefighter 1 (FFI) firefighters to permanent positions.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the Department of Forestry and Fire Prevention (CAL FIRE) in the California Natural Resources Agency to provide fire protection and prevention services, as specified. CAL FIRE is the lead agency for fire protection in the State Responsibility Area (SRA). (Public Resources Code (PRC) 701, 713)
- 2) Requires, in those counties assuming responsibility for fire protection and suppression in the lands classified within the respective counties, there to be budgeted sums to be allocated to those counties at least equal to the direct cost of fire protection and includes the salaries and wages of suppression crews and lookouts and maintenance of firefighting facilities. (PRC 4132)
- 3) Declares that it is the policy of the state that the normal workweek of permanent CAL FIRE employees in fire suppression classes not exceed 84 hours per week, and authorizes compensation in cash or compensating time off, in accordance with specified regulations, for work in excess of the designated workweek. However, if the workweek hours are in conflict with the provisions of a memorandum of understanding (MOU), the terms of the MOU are controlling, as provided. (Government Code (GC) 19846.)
- 4) Establishes the Department of Human Resources (CalHR) and vests it with the powers, duties, and authorities necessary to operate the state civil service system pursuant to Article VII of the California Constitution, the Government Code, the merit principle, and applicable rules duly adopted by the State Personnel Board (SPB). (GC 18502.)

THIS BILL:

- 1) Requires the CalHR, the SPB and any other relevant state agency to take the necessary actions to transition the FF1 classification within CAL FIRE to a permanent firefighter employment classification.
- 2) Requires the transition of the FF1 classification into a permanent employment classification to include meeting and conferring in good faith between the exclusive representative and the state employer.
- 3) Requires the bargaining process to include wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment for affected employees during and after the transition.

FISCAL EFFECT: According to the Senate Appropriations Committee, this bill would result in increased personnel costs to the state. The magnitude of these costs to CalHR and CAL FIRE has yet to be determined, but would likely be, minimally, in the tens of millions of dollars annually.

COMMENTS:

1) Author's statement:

California and the entire West are burning at historic rates. Eight of the most destructive wildfires in California history have hit over the past five years, with two of the deadliest wildfires burning over 16,000 structures in Los Angeles County just 13 days after Christmas. It is crystal clear, even with the state's historic investments in CAL FIRE—which doubled the number of CAL FIRE Firefighters in the last eight years—they need our help. The Golden State continues to face unprecedented challenges—wildfires burning longer, hotter, faster and more frequently than ever before. The new reality has set in and we're never going back. This bill would require the Department of Human Resources, the State Personnel Board, and any other relevant state agency to take the necessary actions to transition seasonal firefighters employed by CAL FIRE to a permanent firefighter employment classification.

- 2) Wildfires in California.** Wildfires have been growing in size, duration, and destructivity over the past 20 years. Growing wildfire risk is due to accumulating fuels, a warming climate, and expanding development in the wildland-urban interface. The 2020 fire season broke numerous records. Five of California's six largest fires in modern history burned at the same time, with more than 4.3 million acres burned across the state, double the previous record. The Los Angeles fires have burned an area nearly the size of Washington, D.C., killed 28 people and damaged or destroyed nearly 16,000 structures, according to CAL FIRE.
- 3) CAL FIRE budget.** CAL FIRE is responsible for fire prevention and suppression in more than 31 million acres across the state. CAL FIRE's workweek, staffing, and operational models are dictated in large part by its service needs, which include providing 24-hours per day, 7-days per week coverage on a year-round basis, as well as augmented response capacity during peak wildfire season. CAL FIRE's firefighters, fire engines, and aircraft respond to more than 5,400 wildland fires that burn an average of 156,000 acres each year, and, according to CAL FIRE, "answer the call [of duty] more than 450,000 times for other emergencies each year."

According to the Legislative Analyst's Officeⁱ (LAO), CAL FIRE's staffing levels have increased significantly over the past decade. Specifically, between fiscal years 2014-15 and 2023-24, the number of positions that CAL FIRE categorizes as related to fire protection increased from 5,756 to 10,275, and the total number of positions at CAL FIRE grew from 6,632 to 12,000 (representing roughly an 80% increase in both cases). In the FY 2020-21 and 2022-23 budgets, the Legislature approved proposals totaling roughly \$170 million per year on an ongoing basis to provide relief staffing, such as adding new fire crews at CAL FIRE and partner agencies. As of 2024-25, the LAO estimates that roughly three-quarters of wildfire response-related positions are permanent and the rest are seasonal.

- 4) **66-hour work week.** Deployments during wildfire season, which now can stretch through the entire year, can exceed 60 days in a row, with exhausting 48-hour shifts lined up back-to-back with little to no opportunities for rest. To address overworked firefighters and professional burnout, the state is in the process of implementing a 66-hour work week plan for the state's firefighters. Unit 8 (CAL FIRE Local 2881), which represents most of CAL FIRE's positions, such as Fire Captains, Fire Apparatus Engineers, Fire Fighter IIs, and Fire Fighter Is, executed a MOU with the state in September 2022 with the state to, among other things, reduce the CAL FIRE firefighter workweek from 72 hours to 66 hours—a 24-hour reduction per 28-day pay period.

By FY 2028-29, the state is committed to adding 2,457 new permanent positions to CAL FIRE for a total of 12,900 positions focused on wildfire response. Staffing up at that capacity takes time, which is why the proposal is phased in over four budget years.

The plan shifts a significant number of seasonal firefighters to permanent firefighters, which means that more engines will be staffed year round than historically has been the case and more firefighters will be working at any given time during non-peak periods than otherwise would have been the case. According to the LAO, the proposal extends the peak staffing period from five months to nine months, resulting in additional CAL FIRE firefighters being on duty at any given time because there will be more engines deployed overall. Further, by extending peak season for an additional four months, the plan will significantly increase the number of firefighters on duty throughout the whole year. The permanent personnel would allow CAL FIRE to adjust its staffing rotation to a platoon model in which firefighters would rotate on and off duty together as a group rather than individually. For example, an engine might be staffed by a team made up of a Fire Captain, Fire Apparatus Engineer, and FF1 on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday; a separate trio of individuals on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday; and a third group on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

- 5) **Fire Fighter 1.** FFI is an entry-level position for seasonal firefighters, requiring basic training and skills for fire suppression, wildland firefighting, and hazardous materials response. This position involves suppressing various fires, assisting with maintenance and repairs, and performing other related duties under supervision.

Under existing law, seasonal firefighters cannot work more than nine months in any 12-consecutive-month period. This forces the CAL FIRE to lose experienced, trained firefighters for three months annually – precisely when California might face major fires.

This bill requires CalHR, the SPB, and any other relevant state agency to take the necessary actions to transition the FFI classification within CAL FIRE to a permanent firefighter employment classification.

The California Professional Firefighters write that the men and women of all employment classifications of CAL FIRE are among the most well-trained and highly-skilled firefighters in the world, but the new normal in California means that the older model of employment for seasonal workers must change in order for them to be most effective. Wildfire season is now year-round, with some of the most devastating fires in California's history taking place during the winter months that were previously thought to be "safe" from this sort of destruction.

6) **Double referral.** This bill was heard in the Assembly Public Employment and Retirement Committee on June 25 and approved 7-0.

7) **Related legislation:**

- a) AB 252 (Bains) requires CAL FIRE to maintain no less than full staffing levels throughout the calendar year and meet specified staffing requirements. This bill was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.
- b) AB 247 (Bryan) requires an incarcerated individual handcrew member, in addition to receiving credits, and a ward or youth placed at the Pine Grove Youth Conservation Camp, to be paid an hourly wage equal to \$7.25 while assigned to an active fire incident. This bill is referred to the Senate Public Safety Committee.
- c) AB 1380 (Elhawary) requires, within six months from the date the bill becomes operative, CAL FIRE, in partnership with CDCR and the California Conservation Camp program, to implement a standardized process to ensure that all individuals who successfully complete the department's firefighting training program while incarcerated receive official written certification before their release from prison. This bill is referred to the Senate Public Safety Committee.
- d) AB 1309 (Flora) requires the state to pay firefighters who are rank-and-file members of State Bargaining Unit 8 within 15% of the average of the salary for corresponding ranks in the 20 California fire departments, agreed to by the exclusive bargaining representative for Bargaining Unit 8 and CalHR in 2017. This bill is referred to the Senate Appropriations Committee.
- e) SB 1062 (McGuire, 2022) would have required, on or before January 1, 2024, CAL FIRE to provide to the Legislature a long-term staffing plan for CAL FIRE and for the plan identify the staffing and infrastructure needs for CAL FIRE through the year 2030 to meet the new era of wildfire firefighting. This bill was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

California Professional Firefighters
 County of Kern
 County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors
 Independent Insurance Agents & Brokers of California, INC.

Opposition

None on file

Analysis Prepared by: Paige Brokaw / NAT. RES. /

ⁱⁱ [The 2024-25 Budget: CalFire—Implementation of a 66-Hour Workweek](#)